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ABSTRACT

The relationship between age and residential factors in environmental preference was investigated by measuring the degree to which recently institutionalized elderly adapted to the new environment. Their needs and preferences for environmental qualities of stimulation, order and privacy were assessed and compared with a matched sample of older adults living in the community, college students, and recently institutionalized adults. Subjects were administered the 30-item Environmental Preferences Questionnaire. Results indicated that all older adults preferred more order, more territoriality, less isolation, less solitude, and less stimulation than did younger respondents. The community older adults expressed greater preference for order, stimulation, territoriality, and solitude than did institutionalized older adults. (Author/HLM)

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Age and Residential Factors in Environmental Preference

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Age and Residential Factors in Environmental Preference

The findings presented in this paper are based on a larger study of person-environment congruence among elderly following institutionalization. As such, this substudy had three foci: (1) to test the utility of a scale to measure environmental preferences for both elderly and college students; (2) to assess age differences in environmental preferences; and (3) to understand whether adaptation to environmental demands occurs among relocated elderly.

Relocation to institutional settings has been found to produce considerable stress for the elderly. In our own research (Kiyak, Liang & Kahana, 1976), where we compared weights assigned to various life events by young college students and community elderly, we found that the event "moving to a nursing home" was rated the third most stressful event, following "death of spouse" and "loss of vision and hearing" in readjustment value.

Studies of relocation among elderly have found increased morbidity and mortality, and often conclude that this implies the elderly have more difficulty adapting to new environments. However, most of these studies have examined elderly moving from one Long Term Care setting to another, or more deteriorated elderly who need total care. Thus for example, Lieberman and Tobin (1971), Bourestom and Pastalan (1974) have found dramatic negative effects of relocation. But Carp (1966, 1974), who examined healthy elderly moving to improved housing, found higher morale and life satisfaction following the move.

The present study was an attempt to measure the degree to which recently-institutionalized elderly have adapted to their new environments, and the

effect of age on environmental preferences. There is little research evidence to support age-related changed or situational factors related to environmental preferences.

In order to do this, the needs and preferences of institutionalized elderly for environmental qualities of privacy, stimulation and order were assessed and compared with a matched sample of elderly and youths who reside in the community. If the two groups of elderly resemble each other in environmental preferences, then we have some evidence that a change in environment has not affected the aged person's environmental preferences. This would suggest difficulty in adapting to demands of the new environment. If, on the other hand, the community elderly report environmental preferences which are more similar to students than to the institutionalized group, this will provide preliminary evidence for situational influences on environmental preferences, and for the ability of older persons to adapt to new environments. Urban-rural differences will also support the hypothesis of situational influences on environmental preferences. Differences between old and young respondents will provide evidence for age or cohort effects on environmental preferences.

Methods

Subjects

Three groups took part in the study: college students, elderly residing in the community, and elderly who had recently relocated to institutions. The first group consisted of 216 undergraduates at a midwestern university. Because this was a commuter campus in a large metropolitan center, all students lived in their own homes. Slightly more than half were female,

and the majority were in their third year of college. Elderly who were living in their own homes or apartments in two midwestern communities were also administered the questionnaire. This group included 184 persons, 82 or whom resided in a large metropolitan area, the remainder in a small town. These groups were expressly chosen to examine urban-rural differences which may affect environmental preferences and perceptions. One hundred seven (107) residents of homes for the aged and nursing homes located in these two communities comprised the third group to which the questionnaire was administered. Thus, one could compare nursing home versus community elderly, and the interaction of residence X community type (i.e., rural nursing homes, urban nursing homes, rural community, urban community). The mean age for the institutionalized subsample was, as one might expect, slightly greater than for the community (81.3 and 73.5 respectively). However, in contrast to their relative proportions nationally, a greater number of the institutional elderly than the community elderly were men (21.5% and 16.1% respectively).

Measures

The measure of environmental preferences administered to the three groups was based on the work of Marshall (1972), Kahana (1973), Kleemeier (1961), and on items from other scales (Edwards, 1959; Gough, 1967). Items representing preferences for privacy, stimulation and orderliness which would be appropriate for all age groups were selected from these scales. A four-point response scale accompanied each item. Responses to this scale by another group of college students and elderly were factor analyzed with orthogonal rotation of principal factors, using the Varimax method and the Kaiser criterion for extracting factors (eigenvalue of 1.5). The resulting

factors were labelled (1) "Preference for Order/Effort" (8 items), (2) "Preference for Stimulation/Activity" (7 items), (3) "Preference for Solitude" (6 items), (4) "Preference for Isolation" (6 items) and (5) "Territoriality" of items within each dimension. Alpha-coefficients ranged from .55 to .76. The resulting 30-item questionnaire (Environmental Preferences Questionnaire) is shown in Table 1. A more detailed description of the development of this instrument is presented in Kiyak (1978).

Procedure

Although the Environmental Preferences Questionnaire was designed to be self-administered, previous experience with self-report measures of the elderly suggested that interviewing these respondents in a face-to-face situation would be more fruitful. The difficulty which many aged persons experience with multiple-category responses could thereby be alleviated. Thus, all the elderly were questioned by interviewers who had received extensive training in interviewing elderly in community and institutional settings. College students were administered the EPQ in their classes. They were given instructions as a group, then asked to complete the questionnaires individually.

RESULTS

A series of analysis of variance tests were conducted on the data, to determine differences between elderly vs. young, elderly in the community vs. those in institutions, and elderly in small towns vs. urban centers. Results are summarized in Table 2.

Although both young and old respondents generally preferred high levels of order and privacy in the environment, differences between them were, nonetheless, significant on all five dimensions of preference. However, the

direction of differences varied across the five dimensions. Elderly preferred more Order in their environment (1.74 vs. 2.00 on a four-point scale), more Territoriality (1.88 vs. 2.09), but less Isolation (2.77 vs. 2.40), less Solitude (2.10 vs. 1.86) and less Stimulation (2.33 vs. 2.17) then did the young respondents. These results are consistent with previous studies of personality changes and lifestyles among the elderly, although the finding of less preference for solitude is somewhat puzzling. It is possible that solitude was equated with loneliness by elderly respondents, as was isolation.

Comparisons between elderly in the community vs. institutions also revealed interesting differences. On all but one dimension, differences were highly significant. Community elderly expressed greater preference for Order, Stimulation, Territoriality and Solitude than did institutionalized elderly. This is consistent with the levels of Order, Stimulation, etc. Found in long-term care vs. home environments, and suggests that if one is to survive in an institutional environment, one must adapt to available levels of environmental characteristics. Preference for Isolation remained quite low for both groups (2.78 and 2.75 on a four-point scale).

Finally, an analysis of urban community-small town differences was conducted. Only on Preference for Stimulation was the difference statistically significant. As expected, urban elderly were found to prefer more stimulation than rural. This may also suggest a self-selection effect. Other comparisons were not statistically significant.

In an attempt to assess the interaction of residence (institution vs. community) with size of community (urban vs. small town), a series of 2x2 interaction tests were also conducted. Only in one case (Preference for Isolation) was the analysis significant. Institutional elderly in the small town pre-

ferred more Isolation than any other elderly group, while their counterparts in the urban institutions preferred the least amount of Isolation. Again, the issue of adaptation to environmental demands may help to explain these results.

DISCUSSION

It should first be stated that this was not a balanced design because all students were urban dwellers, residing in private homes. No institutionalized or rural samples were available. The finding of significant age differences on all five factors suggests that age-related changes occur in environmental preferences. Similarly, the finding that elderly in institutional settings express less need for solitude, physical privacy, stimulation and order indicates that adaptation takes place to restrictions in these environmental characteristics. These results are consistent with a study by Firestone, Evans and Lichtman (1977), who found that institutionalized elderly in wards preferred their present living arrangement and expressed less need for privacy than did residents of private rooms. An earlier study by Lawton and Bader (1970) revealed a similar adaptation process; 50% of institutional elderly who currently occupied multiple-bed rooms expressed preferences for such rooms over single rooms, while those in single rooms were more likely to prefer single rooms.

These findings also suggest that adaptation to environmental change occurs throughout the life cycle. Thus, young college students who regularly experience a range of environmental settings prefer high levels of stimulation, solitude, isolation and relatively little physical privacy and order. It is noteworthy that preferences of nursing home elderly for the latter two environmental characteristics are closer to college students' than to community

elderly's preferences. Despite the seemingly tremendous differences in lifestyles, it is possible that college students and nursing home elderly share a common bond: inability to control their physical environment.

The findings of this study provide an optimistic outlook toward the aging process. Adaptive capacity, at least in the area of environmental preferences, does not appear to decline with age. The elderly individual is quite capable of adjusting his/her preferences to achieve congruence with environmental opportunities for physical privacy, solitude, isolation, stimulation and order. Such a solution aids in reducing dissonance and maintaining equilibrium for the individual. It is important, however, to examine the costs of such adaptation. Future researchers should focus on the process of adaptation among elderly who relocate from independent living to institutional settings, from small towns to cities. We must also examine the adaptive capacities and processes of elderly who are experiencing physical and cognitive decline, those who have experienced minimal environmental change versus those with a lifetime of major relocations, as well as comparing elderly with extensive support systems versus restricted support networks. The present study represents an initial step in our understanding of adaptive capacities of the elderly.

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TABLE 1

ENVIRONMENTAL PREFERENCES QUESTIONNAIRE

A. Preference for Order/Effort

1. I like to put a great deal of effort into everything I do.
2. I like to have a special place for everything.
3. I like to keep my things in perfect order.
4. I like to shine my own shoes.
5. I like things that take a lot of effort.
6. Whenever I have a job to do, I want to do it perfectly.
7. I can get a great deal of work done in a short time.
8. I make a point of making it to all my appointments exactly on time, or even early.

B. Preference for Activity/Stimulation

1. I like to be "on the go" all the time.
2. I like to be involved in many different activities.
3. I like bright lights (e.g., brightly lit rooms, bright sunlight).
4. I don't like to be idle (i.e., without anything to do).
5. I like to have something to do every minute of the day.
6. I like to take part in activities on a regular basis, rather than once in a while.
7. I can't sit still for very long.

C. Preference for Physical Privacy

1. Having a private room is important for me.
2. Having a private bathroom is important for me.
3. I don't like to share my living quarters with others.

D. Preference for Isolation

1. I would like to live in a secluded house out of the sight of other houses.
2. If I had to choose, I would rather live in a cabin in the woods than in a high-rise apartment in the city.
3. A house should be so far away from neighbors that only by yelling at the top of your lungs can you be heard.
4. I would prefer to have a house away from the noise of traffic.
5. A house should be far enough away from neighbors that when you look out your window, you can't look into the neighbor's house.
6. I would like to have a private hideaway where no one else could enter.

E. Preference for Solitude

1. It is important for me to be alone whenever I want to be.
2. I don't mind if other people come into my room without knocking.
3. I sometimes want to get away from everyone for awhile, even my closest friends and relatives.
4. I like to be alone sometimes.
5. There are times when I really want people to leave me alone and not intrude on my thoughts even if we are in the same room.
6. I think it is important for members of a family to get away from each other now and then.

Table 2

Analysis of Variance Results

		F	p	df
1.	Preference for Order/Effort			
a)	Young vs. Old Respondents*	36.39	.0001	1/506
b)	Community vs. Nursing Home Elderly	12.06	.0006	1/289
c)	Urban vs. Small Town Elderly	3.02	.08	1/289
d)	Residence Type X Location	3.10	.08	1/287
2.	Preference for Activity/Stimulation			
a)	Young vs. Old Respondents	9.30	.002	1/506
b)	Community vs. Nursing Home Elderly	26.90	.0001	1/289
c)	Urban vs. Small Town Elderly	28.98	.0001	1/289
d)	Residence Type X Location	1.50	.22	1/287
3.	Preference for Physical Privacy			
a)	Young vs. Old Respondents	8.94	.003	1/506
b)	Community vs. Nursing Home Elderly	30.24	.0001	1/289
c)	Urban vs. Small Town Elderly	.02	.90	1/289
d)	Residence Type X Location	.96	.33	1/287
4.	Preference for Isolation			
a)	Young vs. Old Respondents	42.09	.0001	1/506
b)	Community vs. Nursing Home Elderly	.19	.66	1/289
c)	Urban vs. Small Town Elderly	2.68	.10	1/289
d)	Residence Type X Location	6.87	.009	1/287
5.	Preference for Solitude			
a)	Young vs. Old Respondents	21.69	.0001	1/506
b)	Community vs. Nursing Home Elderly	4.14	.04	1/289
c)	Urban vs. Small Town Elderly	1.19	.27	1/289
d)	Residence Type X Location	.39	.54	1/287

*n = 217 Students, 82 Urban Community Elderly, 102 Small Town Community Elderly, 63 Urban Nursing Home Elderly, 44 Small Town Nursing Home Elderly.